

RIKSMUSEETS ETNOGRAFISKA AVDELNING

SMÄRRE MEDDELANDEN

N:r 9

# STRING FIGURES IN AFRICA

BY

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## STRING FIGURES IN AFRICA

The making of string figures or cat's cradle (German "Fadenspiele") may justly be regarded as a cosmopolitan form of amusement seeing that it is found in all parts of the world. Early examples of it are given by R. Andree from Eskimos, North American Indians, Polynesians, Australian aborigines, and from New Guinea, and other places, though nothing from Africa.<sup>1</sup> As to whether up to the end of the 19th century the occurrence of string figures in general have been paid attention to by anyone besides Andree I am not prepared to say, but it may in any case safely be stated that these games and their distribution only in the present century have been made the objects of systematic study. And, as regards Africa, I have been unable to find a single reference in the literature dating earlier than 1906.

The text-book for the study of string figures in a general way seems to be Mrs. Jayne's work, but as unfortunately I have not been able to obtain a copy of this book I am not in a position to say to what extent she has dealt with African string figures.<sup>2</sup> Judging from Haddon,<sup>3</sup> the instances she adduced from the Dark Continent do not appear to be numerous. The African examples that are given by Miss K. Haddon and Rouse Ball are quoted from the most important of the authors mentioned in the following, viz. Haddon, Parkinson, and Cunningham.<sup>4</sup> The pioneer work as regards string figures in Africa is Haddon's treatise of 1906 containing some ten references to this pastime from different negro tribes, most of them from South Africa.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> R. Andree, *Ethnographische Parallelen und Vergleiche*. N. Folge, p. 96, Leipzig 1889. See also Andree in *Correspondenzblatt Deutsch. Anthropol. Gesellschaft* 1888, p. 54, and in *Mittheil. Wiener Anthropol. Ges.* 1888, p. 214; and F. Boas in *Internat. Archiv f. Ethnographie* 1888, p. 229; and W. H. R. Rivers and A. C. Haddon in *Man* 1902 (2), p. 146.

<sup>2</sup> C. F. Jayne, *String Figures: A Study of Cat's Cradle in many Lands*. New York 1906. Reviewed by W. H. R. Rivers in *Folk-Lore* 1907 (18), pp. 122—116.

<sup>3</sup> A. C. Haddon, *String Figures from South Africa*. *Journ. Anthropol. Inst.* 1906, pp. 142—149.

<sup>4</sup> K. Haddon, *Cat's Cradles from many Lands*. 2nd impression. London 1912. W. W. Rouse Ball, *String Figures, an Amusement for Everybody*. 3rd ed. Cambridge 1928.

To these data of Haddon's I propose in this little paper to add a number of others, venturing to believe that all these taken together will provide a fairly comprehensive survey of what at the present time is known of the geographical distribution of string figures in Africa. Personally I possess no experience from Africa of these games, all the data I am here adducing being collected from the literature.

Let us then begin with West Africa south of the Sahara. The most northern references in the literature to the occurrence of string figures in these parts are, so far as I have been able to ascertain, from Sierra Leone, whence Hornell recently has described a number of them; from the Mende and the Temne, as also from the Fulas. The latter, however, according to H. possess only a very few string games.<sup>1</sup> He also mentions these games from the Kru of Sierra Leone and Liberia.<sup>2</sup>

Next I have found references from the Tshi tribes on the Gold Coast, and from Ashanti (the game is there called *nsana aba*).<sup>3</sup> If, however, it be remembered that Hornell apparently was the first — and as late as 1928 at that — to report string figures from Sierra Leone and Liberia, it may be considered as fairly certain that they occur among many more peoples in these two countries than those just mentioned, and further that they most likely also occur in French territory north of and at the back of Sierra Leone, and in addition on the Ivory Coast. The lacuna here apparent may, in one word, easily be filled in as in the first place its existence presumably is due to the circumstance of nobody having hitherto paid any attention to string figures in these parts.

From the Yoruba Parkinson adduces a number of string figures.<sup>4</sup> According to Talbot, in Southern Nigeria "almost countless variations of Cat's cradle are known, particularly among the semi-Bantu".<sup>5</sup> No further particulars are given by him, though in an earlier work he almost word for word gives the same information about the Ekoi

<sup>1</sup> J. Hornell, *The String Games and Tricks of Sierra Leone*. *Sierra Leone Studies*, No. XIII, Sept. 1928, pp. 3-9.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. J. Parkinson, *Yoruba String Figures*. *Journ. Anthr. Inst.* 1906, p. 132.

<sup>3</sup> C. L. T. Griffith, *Gold Coast "String Games"*. *Journ. Anthr. Inst.* 1925, pp. 271-302.

<sup>4</sup> Parkinson (see note 2), pp. 132-141.

<sup>5</sup> P. Amaury Talbot, *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria*, III, p. 817. Oxford 1926.

(their word for cat's cradle is *ikomm*).<sup>1</sup> The same thing Mansfeld says of the tribes in the Cross River area, whence he adduces many examples (cat's cradle, *arik*).<sup>2</sup> In Cameroon string figures would seem to be made by many tribes. Such is the case with the Banyangi,<sup>3</sup> the Bana on the Logone River (their name for them being *fuda*)<sup>4</sup> and the Pangwe.<sup>5</sup> The Bubi on Fernando Po call their string figures *oeopolala*.<sup>6</sup>

How the matter stands as regards the occurrence of string figures in the French Congo I do not know, but presumably they are also found there in parts although in the case of that region there obtains in the literature a silence equalling that concerning French West Africa. In fact, in my collection of excerpts I do not possess one single reference to string figures taken from any French work. Thanks to Professor B. Struck I am, however, in the possession of one piece of information from the Loango coast which Struck in 1909 obtained from the Loango man Joseph Tjikaya. According to this man, every boy among the Bavili knows some string figures, and has names for them: "»Leopard», »Papagei», und was Tjikaya als besonders schön hervorhob, eines mit dem Namen »Berg». Er brachte aber keines mehr richtig zusammen, sodass ich darauf verzichtet habe, die etwa noch erhältlichen Bruchstücke aufzunehmen. Tjikaya (der zweimal bei den Baluba war) erwähnte mir noch, dass sich die Fadenspiele der Baluba dadurch von denen der Bavili unterscheiden, dass sie nicht zwischen den Fingern abgehoben werden, sondern der Faden mit Hilfe der Zähne und des ganzen Handgelenks geschlungen wird".<sup>7</sup>

From the Belgian Congo there are a good many references to string figures, and apparently they are very widespread there. Even the toes are frequently made use of in their construction. The most detailed

<sup>1</sup> P. A. Talbot, *In the Shadow of the Bush*, p. 286. London 1912.

<sup>2</sup> A. Mansfeld, *Urwalddokumente*, p. 119, fig. 101. Berlin 1908.

<sup>3</sup> F. Stachewski, *Die Banjangi*. Baessler-Archiv, p. 53. Leipzig 1917.

<sup>4</sup> G. v. Hagen, *Die Bana*. Baessler-Archiv 1912 (2), p. 86, fig. 13.

<sup>5</sup> G. Tessmann, *Die Kinderspiele der Pangwe*. Baessler-Archiv 1912, pp. 271–278, figs. 38, a–h.

<sup>6</sup> G. Tessmann, *Die Bubi auf Fernando Po*, pp. 163–165, figs. 159–163. Darmstadt 1923.

<sup>7</sup> B. Struck in letter to G. Lindblom, dated 15. 12. 1929. — For the sake of completeness it may here be pointed out that in Man 1912 (pp. 156–158) certain string figures (called *nyam tunerra*) are said to occur in the Injor country, "West Africa". Where that country is supposed to be situated I do not know (Micronesia?), but I think I am correct in saying that it is not in Africa that it exists.

description of string figures from this region has been given by Starr who depicts about 60 instances from tribes along the Congo river, and twelve that were made by a Baluba boy from the district around Luluaburg (as regards the Baluba, cf. Struck's information cited above). Starr's data from the Congo basin proper are from the following tribes (their names are here given in his own spelling): Bakongo, Bobangi [Bayanzi] — general name for the game is *meso mandende*, 'lattice', cf. Whitehead, *infra* — Ntumba (on Lake Tumba) Nkundu, Bangala, Ngombe, Upoto, and Balumbu (at Basoko).<sup>1</sup>

Starr's data may here be supplemented with contributions from other students. Of the Bakongo, Weeks says that string figures are to be found among them but "they are not common".<sup>2</sup> In an earlier work he says, however, of the same people: "With their fingers and toes and three or four yards of string they make a large variety of cat's cradle, each one having its own name".<sup>3</sup> Also of the Bangala Weeks gives account. About that tribe he writes: "*nka*, or cat's cradle, is well known to the lads and lassies, and many an hour is spent in working out different designs on their fingers and toes... There is a very large number of designs, but some children are more expert than others in forming them accurately and easily".<sup>4</sup> The Babangi (Banyanzi) call cat's cradle *misondeke*,<sup>5</sup> and the Tofoke (Topoke) call it *sengo*.<sup>6</sup> When the last-mentioned execute certain designs they find it necessary to make use of the big toe.

<sup>1</sup> F. Starr, *Ethnographical Notes from the Congo Free State*. Proceed. Davenport Academy of Science, Vol. XII, pp. 148—175, with figs. Davenport, Iowa, U. S. A. 1909. (In passing, it may here be pointed out that Starr, no doubt from inattention, on p. 150 makes the mistake of placing the Wajiji and the Ulungu in British East Africa). Vide also Starr, *Congo Natives*, p. 22. Pl. XXXIV (woman making a string figure). Chicago 1912.

<sup>2</sup> J. H. Weeks, *Among the primitive Bakongo*, p. 126. London 1914.

<sup>3</sup> J. H. Weeks, *Notes on some customs of the Lower Congo people*. Folk-Lore. XX, p. 462. London 1909.

<sup>4</sup> J. H. Weeks, *Anthropological Notes on the Bangala of the Upper Congo River*. Journal Anthropol. Inst. 1910, p. 407. Weeks, *Among Congo Cannibals*, p. 555, with drawings. London 1913.

<sup>5</sup> H. Johnston, *George Grenfell and the Congo*, p. 711. London 1908 (after J. Whitehead, *Grammar and Dictionary of the Bobangi Language*).

<sup>6</sup> E. Torday & T. A. Joyce, *Notes Ethnographiques sur des Populations habitant les bassins du Kasai et du Kwango Oriental*, pp. 11, 203. Annales du Musée du Congo Belge. Bruxelles 1922.

In the Kasai region Starr did not observe any string figures. Here, however, he (as he himself says, p. 168) only made "a desultory effort". That in parts they are also here found may be gathered from Torday and Joyce, who mention cat's cradle from the Bashilele and the Bangongo. The latter, who call this game *boshamu*, have two principal figures, "the man" and "the woman", the latter only being possible of formation with the assistance of some other person.<sup>1</sup> Among the Batwa Pygmies of the Kasai valley, too, string figures are said to be found. It is very possible, not to say probable, that such is the case, but the only evidence we have as to this does not carry overmuch weight, viz. that of a Batwa man at the Universal Exposition at St. Louis, 1904.<sup>2</sup>

The Zulu children in Zululand and Natal also play at cat's cradle (called *uzamanjeka*, which means "it sways of itself"),<sup>3</sup> as do also the Basuto,<sup>4</sup> and the Barotse and the Batoka on the Zambesi (Haddon, 1906, p. 143). Haddon also mentions a string game from Rhodesia (p. 146) although not giving the exact locality. The Baila of Northern Rhodesia do not appear to make string figures.<sup>5</sup> Among the Batonga it appears that only girls occupy themselves with this game (called *ku tha buhlolo*) in which they also use their lips. They compete together and try to surpass each other in inventing new figures.<sup>6</sup>

Haddon (1906, p. 146) also cites some instances from Portuguese East Africa (Beira) although without naming the tribe.

From the Wayao in the Shiré highlands there are several data.<sup>7</sup> Their general name for all string figures is *chitagao*, which, accord-

<sup>1</sup> *Torday & Joyce*, Notes Ethnographiques sur les Peuples communément appelés Bakuba, etc., p. 95, fig. 68. Bruxelles 1910.

<sup>2</sup> *A. C. Haddon*, 1906, p. 142. *K. Haddon*, p. 80 (after *Jayne*, p. 267).

<sup>3</sup> *A. C. Haddon*, 1906, p. 142. *D. Kidd*, *Savage Childhood*, p. 176, with photo (playing girls). London 1906.

<sup>4</sup> *Haddon*, 1906, p. 142.

<sup>5</sup> *Smith and Dale* (The Ila-speaking Peoples, II, p. 261. London 1920) in their exhaustive account of the Baila at play only mention one kind of puzzle.

<sup>6</sup> *H. A. Junod*, *The Life of a South African Tribe*. I. p. 175 (with drawings). London 1912.

<sup>7</sup> *A. Werner*, *British Central Africa*, p. 113. London 1906. *W. A. Cunningham*, *String Figures and Tricks from Central Africa*. Journ. Anthr. Inst. 1906, p. 123. *H. S. Stannus*, *The Wayao of Nyasaland*. Harvard African Studies, Vol. III, p. 364. Cambridge, Mass. 1922.

ing to Stannus, means "the spider's web", which must be considered as being a very apt name. According to the authors mentioned in the preceding note, cat's cradle also occurs among tribes neighbouring on the Wayao although not expressly giving their names. Stannus gives the word *tandande* ('the spider') for cat's cradle (cf. Yao, *supra*) but without mentioning to what language it belongs. Judging from the context, however, it cannot but be a question of the Anyanya.

In Masasi, in south-eastern Tanganyika Territory, married women and girls showed a number of string figures to Weule.<sup>1</sup> He does not say however, to what tribe they belonged. The population, it should be noted, is very mixed in the district of Masasi, and the drawing up of tribal demarcations would, according to Weule, be impossible. Wakua, Wayao, "Wanyassa", and others are here living all jumbled up.

Fülleborn observed this game among Wanyika children (Unyika country) south of Lake Rukwa,<sup>2</sup> and Cunningham mentions it from Ulungu at the south end of Lake Tanganyika (general name for all string figures is *wili*), from Ufipa on the south-east shore, and from the "Marungi" and the "Wajiji" (in the Ujiji district; the game here called *ufindo*) on the western shore of the lake.<sup>3</sup>

Further, the game is known from the Safwa, living to the north of the Konde country at the north end of Lake Nyasa (they also make use of their big toe in the forming of the figures),<sup>4</sup> and from the Wahehe, who call it *mudao* (practised both by grown people and children).<sup>5</sup>

According to H. Krauss, string figures are found among the coast tribes of Tanganyika Territory, but he only makes mention of the Wakami and the Ukwela country. The game is here called *lufambo* (properly the name of the bush bearing pea-like, beautifully red fruits with a small black spot).<sup>6</sup> The majority of the figures reproduced by Krauss are more in the way of being examples of string tricks than

<sup>1</sup> K. Weule, *Wissenschaftliche Ergebnisse meiner ethnographischen Forschungsreise in den Südosten Deutsch-Ostafrikas*, p. 15. Berlin 1908.

<sup>2</sup> F. Fülleborn, *Das deutsche Njassa- und Ruwuma-Gebiet*, p. 356. Berlin 1906.

<sup>3</sup> Cunningham, pp. 121 *seq.*

<sup>4</sup> E. Kootz-Kretschmer, *Die Safwa*, Vol. I, p. 41. Berlin 1926.

<sup>5</sup> O. Dempfwolff, *Beiträge zur Volksbeschreibung d. Hehe*. Baessler-Archiv, Bd. 4, p. 127. Berlin 1914.

<sup>6</sup> H. Krauss, *Lufambo*. Globus, Bd. 92, 1907, pp. 221–222, with 9 figures.



string figures. The Washambaa formerly amused themselves with such cat's cradle games but nowadays these are said to be unknown among them.<sup>1</sup>

From the Kenya Colony I do not possess any conclusive evidence as to the occurrence of string figures but, judging from a statement by A. Werner, it is at any rate found among the Pokomo on the Tana River, and among the Swahili. She writes: "Chondowe is used in Pokomo not only for riddles, but for string tricks (Swahili: *tambo*)<sup>2</sup> and other puzzles".<sup>3</sup> With "Schnurabhebespielen" it is most adults that occupy themselves among the Swahili, is stated by Krauss.<sup>4</sup> Velten, notwithstanding devoting a special chapter to the games of the Swahili children, makes no mention whatever of string figures.<sup>5</sup>

From Uganda is mentioned a string trick, the identical one, by Cunningham (pp. 122, 130) and Haddon (p. 142). It was, however, not actually obtained in Uganda. Cunningham learnt it from a native of that country in the service of the German "governor" of Usambara, and Haddon does not state the source of his information. Roscoe, in his account of games in Uganda, makes no mention of string figures (The Baganda, 1911) and it therefore appears to me an open question as to whether these games are practised there or not.

Moving now on to northern Africa, north of negro-inhabited region, I have to admit that the information I have been able to gather as regards string figures is exceedingly scanty. Cunningham saw in Cairo a little girl in the street "doing something of this kind with a piece of string", but he had "no opportunity of following up the clue." On the other hand he succeeded in obtaining some figures on Lake Birket el Qurun in the Fayum Province of Egypt, although not before he had shown some pictures of Central Africa natives performing such figures. One of the performers was a local Birket el Qurun fisherman, and another was a native of the district near Wadi Halfa.<sup>6</sup> Miss Blackman

<sup>1</sup> *Karasek-Eichhorn*, Beiträge zur Kenntnis d. Waschambaa, I. Baessler-Arch., Bd. 1, p. 184. Berlin 1911.

<sup>2</sup> *Tambo* literally means 'string' or 'knot'.

<sup>3</sup> *A. Werner*, Introduction to *A. C. Hollis*, Nyika Enigmas. Journ. of the African Soc. No. LXII, p. 137. London 1917.

<sup>4</sup> *H. Krauss*, Spielzeug d. Suahelikinder. Globus 1907 (92), p. 357.

<sup>5</sup> *C. Velten*, Sitten u. Gebräuche d. Suaheli. Göttingen 1901.

<sup>6</sup> *W. A. Cunningham*, String Tricks from Egypt. Man 1908, pp. 149—150.

makes no mention of this game in her work published a couple of years ago.<sup>1</sup>

As to whether cat's cradle was practised in ancient Egypt I am unable to say; it is not, however, mentioned by either Wilkinson or Ermann-Ranke.

To wind up with, Haddon (after Jayne) mentions cat's cradle among some little Arab girls in Algiers who, however, had learnt it at a French school (Haddon, p. 142).

I dare to repeat my assertion that the instances I have here adduced as to the occurrence of cat's cradle in Africa may be considered as fairly exhaustive in regard to accessible references in the literature to this game.<sup>2</sup> I have, however, a very definite feeling that it is much more widely spread in Africa than is apparent from the data here collected, and therefore I do not think that the time is yet ripe for cartographically publishing its distribution in the Dark Continent but content myself with giving a geographical summary of the above. Evidence as to the occurrence of string figures is thus available from the following countries and peoples in Africa:

Sierra Leona: Mende, Temne, Kru, Fulas.

Liberia: Kru.

Gold Coast and Ashanti: Tshi-speaking peoples.

Nigeria and Cross River district: Yoruba, Ekoi and other Semi-Bantu.

Cameroon and Fernando Poo: Banyangi, Bana, Pangwe, Bubi.

Loango Coast: Bavili.

Belgian Congo: Bakongo, Babangi (Bayanzi), Ntumba, Nkundu, Bangala, Ngombe, Upoto, Balumbu, Tofoke, Bashilele, Bangongo, Baluba and Batwa (?).

South Africa: Zulu in Zululand and Natal, Basuto, Barotse, Batoka.

Rhodesia: tribe or place not given.

Portuguese East Africa: Batonga; tribes around Beira?

Nyasaland: Wayao, Anyanya.

<sup>1</sup> *W. S. Blackman*, *The Fellahin of Upper Egypt, their religious, social and industrial life to-day, etc.* London 1927.

<sup>2</sup> I must however make reservation against the possible occurrence of references to this game in "Sudan Notes and Records" for the reason that this Series (apart from a few excerpts that their respective authors have been kind enough to send me) unfortunately are not to be had in Sweden.

Tanganyika Territory: Wayao, the region of Masasi (Wayao? Makua? "Wanyassa"?), Wanyika, Ulungu, Ufipa, "Marungu", "Wajiji", Safwa, Wahehe, Wakami, Ukwele, Swahili, Washambaa (earlier but not now).

Kenya Colony: Pokomo, Swahili.

Uganda?

Egypt: Fayum Province.

When it is a question of determining the geographical distribution of a culture element, even definite data as to its non-occurrence are of value. As regards string figures, however, I have only in very few instances succeeded in obtaining this sort of definite negative information. Thus these games are unknown among the Nyaturu in the Tanganyika Territory.<sup>1</sup> According to Bieber, they are not either found in Kaffa nor, most probably, among the Abyssinians, seeing that they are not mentioned by Mittwoch in his exhaustive treatise on Abyssinian children's games.<sup>2</sup> Nor are they likely to be found among the Wadjagga on Kilimandjaro, because they are not referred to by such an authority on this people as Gutmann.<sup>3</sup>

As is well known, string figures are occasionally connected with magic import. Nothing of that nature would, however, seem to be found among the African examples here brought together. They are, on the other hand, exponents of a feature more typically peculiar to string figures, namely that phrases are often said or sung during the formation of the figures. Such is the case on the Gold Coast (Griffith, p. 271) and presumable also in other regions, although information as to this is lacking. Griffith also makes another interesting statement: "I heard a rumour that in Ashanti old people can make figures which have a derogatory or abusive signification". From these brief hints thrown out by Griffith one might venture to suppose that there exists a great deal in connection with the making of string figures in Africa that we as yet know nothing about. The matter is worthy of further study.



<sup>1</sup> *O. Reche*, Zur Ethnographie d. abflusslos. Gebietes Deutsch-Ostafrikas. p. 67. Hamburg 1914. *E. v. Sick*, in Baessler-Archiv 1916, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> *Mittwoch*, Abessinische Kinderspiele. Mitteil. Seminars Oriental. Sprachen, Bd. 13:2. Berlin 1910. Neither are string figures mentioned by *M. Cohn* (Jeux Abyssins, Journal Asiatique, T. XVIII, pp. 463-497. Paris 1911).

<sup>3</sup> *B. Gutmann*, Kinderspiele bei d. Wadschagga. Globus 1909 (Bd. 95), pp. 286-289, 300-304.

This little paper is not presumed to be anything beyond a mere collocation of material for study, compiled with the object of reawakening interest in string figures, their distribution in Africa, and their deeper significance, provided that in places they may be found possessing such. It is intended as a link, however modest, in the series of researches into the occurrence of certain hitherto rather overlooked culture elements in Africa that I have been carrying out in latter years. Before closing I cannot, however, altogether leave out the well-worn question: Is this culture element in Africa an independent invention, or has it been introduced there as a loan? In spite of its being found practically all over the face of the earth, and although identical figures are often made in regions widely apart from each other, it would seem as if that question were an exceedingly difficult one to answer. It appears likely that people most anywhere, given the presence of a piece of string, might easily conceive the idea of amusing themselves in this way. On the other hand there are instances of peoples that, although possessing string, do not make string figures. But, if we limit ourselves to Africa, are we then able to trace any continuity in the occurrence of string figures? Hornell (in his paper above referred, p. 7) opines that: "there can be no doubt the presence of the game in Sierra Leone is evidence of the far-reaching arm of the Arab culture and influence". To this might be added the occurrence of string figures in regions with even stronger Arab influence, among the Swahili and in the Tanganyika Territory. On the other hand I am unacquainted with the degree in which this game occurs among Arab tribes in Africa and Arabia, and moreover there are important centres in Africa for string figures — in so far as we know them (western Congo and South Africa) — that can hardly be said to be Arab-influenced. What in the distribution given above strikes one as being of remarkable significance is that the Hamitic peoples are not represented in it. Is this an actual fact, or is it only by accident that so it appears? Here is another question I am unable to answer, but pass it on to the readers of the paper. Should any one, by positive or negative information, afford me assistance in supplementing the picture here above given of the distribution of string figures in Africa, I should be exceedingly beholden to him.

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## RIKSMUSEETS ETNOGRAFISKA AVDELNING

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